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Reimagining US Grand Strategy

Reimagining US Diplomacy

The Power of US Cultural Diplomacy

By Evan Cooper

November 2025

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The Power of US Cultural Diplomacy

Examining methods for utilizing U.S. culture for diplomatic engagement

By Evan Cooper

While elements of U.S. power have declined in the post-Cold War era, U.S. culture remains a global force. It is most often culture that shapes views on the United States for foreign audiences. While there is some recognition by policymakers of the immense power that U.S. culture holds for diplomatic purposes, there has been a lack of strategic utilization. This report examines past efforts to advance U.S. diplomacy through culture and provides insights as to how to improve the tool going forwards.

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Executive Summary

Over the past two decades, the United States has experienced a relative decline in traditional measures of power — military dominance, economic primacy, and political cohesion. Yet, even amid these challenges, the country remains an unparalleled cultural superpower. American music, film, literature, fashion, cuisine, sports, and digital innovation continue to shape global tastes, inspire admiration, and provoke debate. This enduring cultural influence represents a strategic asset, one that can advance U.S. interests abroad when deliberately harnessed through cultural diplomacy.

This report examines the role of cultural diplomacy in the U.S. foreign policy toolkit, its past and present applications, and considers its future potential. Cultural diplomacy is best understood as the use of cultural assets — arts, education, heritage, food, sports, and entertainment — for diplomatic ends. While it overlaps with public diplomacy, cultural diplomacy is not intended to communicate U.S. government policies; instead, cultural diplomacy cultivates mutual understanding, opens channels of communication, and embeds American values in the global imagination. Cultural diplomacy is not propaganda: Its success often lies not in uncritical praise for U.S. actions abroad, but in fostering authentic engagement, even when cultural products highlight the United States’ shortcomings. U.S. leaders have long recognized the role of culture in shaping perceptions abroad. Yet efforts to institutionalize cultural diplomacy have often been inconsistent and politically fraught, limited by tensions between artistic freedom and government sponsorship. Nevertheless, when effectively deployed, cultural diplomacy has proved a powerful tool for building trust, shaping elite opinion, and advancing U.S. interests.

The report surveys U.S. cultural diplomacy initiatives across multiple domains. In cuisine, programs such as the Diplomatic Culinary Partnership demonstrate the potential of chefs and food traditions to convey America’s diversity and openness. In fashion, State Department-sponsored fashion shows suggest the potential for the underutilized medium. Fine arts have long been central to U.S. cultural diplomacy, with programs like Art in Embassies and efforts to repatriate looted works reinforcing values of creativity and respect for heritage. Literature has also played a role: Cold War-era writer exchanges between Americans and Soviets nurtured understanding and admiration for one another’s histories. Music stands as perhaps the most notable use case of U.S. cultural diplomacy, with the Jazz Ambassadors program sending icons such as Dizzy Gillespie and Louis Armstrong abroad in the 1950s and 60s. These tours showcased American creativity and freedom of expression, while opening space for honest examination of those instances when the United States fails to live up to its ideals. Cinema, too, has been a powerful medium, with American films shaping perceptions worldwide. Initiatives like the American Film Showcase facilitate screenings abroad and support international films in the United States, helping sustain cultural connections. Theater and ballet exchanges during the early Cold War, from productions like “Porgy and Bess” in Moscow to reciprocal ballet tours, demonstrated culture’s ability to ease tensions even between rivals. Sports have provided a consistent vehicle for cultural diplomacy, from Albert Spalding’s late 19th-century baseball tours to the Harlem Globetrotters’ Cold War exhibitions and the modern Sports Envoy Program. Video games represent the newest frontier. US-supported initiatives like Trace Effects and the Game Exchange program show how interactive media can foster ties across borders, though competitors such as China have been quicker to integrate cultural storytelling into popular games. The United States has a rich

history of cultural diplomatic initiatives, but it has tended to use them inconsistently and without a clear view of how they integrate into a greater diplomatic strategy.

The report identifies recurring challenges for U.S. cultural diplomacy: difficulty in measuring impact, balancing respect for artistic freedom with diplomatic objectives, and sustaining funding across administrations. Despite these obstacles, the evidence suggests that well-designed U.S. government-sponsored programs can shape perceptions, build networks among elites, and open channels of communication to various populations. Moving forward, investment should prioritize underdeveloped fields such as culinary diplomacy, fashion, and video games, while reinvigorating proven models like tours of major American musicians. Partnerships with private industry — from restaurant groups and fashion houses to gaming companies and sports franchises — could amplify reach while reducing costs to taxpayers.

American culture remains one of the country's greatest comparative advantages. Unlike military force or economic leverage, culture fosters relationships that endure beyond specific administrations or policy disputes. It builds goodwill, opens markets, strengthens alliances, and provides avenues for influence that can be leveraged in times of crisis. Failing to invest in this area, as has been the case in the post-Cold War era, risks reducing the ability of the United States to use diplomacy to advance its interests. By contrast, renewed commitment to cultural diplomacy would allow the United States to refresh its global image, nurture collaborations, and sustain critical partnerships in an increasingly multipolar world. Cultural diplomacy should not be viewed as the arena for wealthy elites to cosplay as ambassadors but instead as a vital means of building enduring ties and mutual understanding. At a time when other sources of U.S. power face strain, cultural diplomacy offers a cost-effective and uniquely American way to strengthen the nation's position in the world.

Introduction

Over the past two decades, the United States has faced a relative decline in power. Its military has been unable to secure its objectives in major conflicts, its economy no longer dominates the globe, and its domestic dysfunction poses consistent challenges. But while these components of U.S. power have diminished, the country has sustained its role as a cultural superpower. American musicians, actors, artists, and cultural exports continue to captivate audiences around the world, exposing billions of people to American ideas and values. This deep well of influence has been cultivated over centuries, shaping how the world sees the United States and drawing attention, money, and talent to its shores.

U.S. cultural might provides an incredible tool for American policymakers, one that has helped further the country's interests and facilitated its rise as a global power. Much of the benefit derived from U.S. culture has been organic, as American individuals and groups travel, seek out new markets and audiences abroad, and share their talents. But there has been significant programming coordinated by the U.S. government to enable this cultural exchange and advance U.S. interests through it. These activities sponsored or coordinated by the government are referred to as formal cultural diplomacy and are the focus of this report. These programs have shown foreign elites the power of the United States, attracted scholars and artists to the country, opened new markets for U.S. exports, and supported the vision of the United States as a country that values individual expression. They have also at times displayed the country's faults, exposing elements of racism, ideological extremism, and jingoism.

The intention of this report is to provide a scope of the formal cultural diplomatic activities that have been utilized by the United States and provide a foundation for thinking about the future of U.S. cultural diplomacy. It begins with a brief explanation of what cultural diplomacy entails and why it matters as an element of U.S. power. The subsequent section provides a survey of U.S. cultural diplomatic activities. The examination of past U.S. cultural diplomacy is by no means intended to be exhaustive. Rather, it contains the past endeavors that are most pertinent for today and the coming years. The report concludes with ideas for how to bolster U.S. cultural diplomacy and the areas in which investment might yield the greatest results.

U.S. cultural power, while immense, has been underutilized in the post-Cold War era and should not be taken for granted. The United States should strategically deploy its culture to advance its interests; that calls for smart investment by the U.S. government in cultural diplomacy. This requires identifying the areas in which the United States has comparative advantage and where government support and diplomatic cooperation can further that benefit. This report aims to serve as a reminder of what cultural diplomacy can accomplish and a basis for generating new ideas about how to leverage this remaining source of tremendous American power.



Louis Armstrong and his wife, Lucille Wilson, at the Schiphol Airport, Netherlands, Oct. 12, 1949. Photo by Joop van Bilsen.

Why Cultural Diplomacy?

Any examination of cultural diplomacy must begin with a definition. This is no easy feat. As the historian Michael Krenn put it in his history of U.S. cultural diplomacy, “Cultural diplomacy, due to the very fact that it deals with the equally slippery term ‘culture,’ has proven difficult to define with absolute precision.”¹ Thomas Jefferson came close to capturing the purpose of cultural diplomacy when he defended his “enthusiasm” for the arts “to improve the taste of my countrymen, to increase their reputation, to reconcile to them the respect of the world and procure them its praise.”² Defining the activities that constitute cultural diplomacy is a greater challenge, as culture is ever-shifting and nebulous. For this report, cultural diplomacy entails the use of culture as means for diplomatic ends. Hafsa Nawaz, writing for the USC Center for Public Diplomacy, captured this view of the practice well, stating, “Cultural diplomacy is the strategic use of cultural assets — such as arts, education, and heritage — to foster mutual understanding between nations.”³

It is important to note that cultural diplomacy is not merely cultural exchange, although cultural exchange is a major component of cultural diplomacy. Cultural diplomacy requires leveraging exchange between countries to advance national interests. Culture is rooted in place and values and thus holds immense value in diplomacy, which aims to align the interests of others with one’s own. In the case of conflicting values, or the perception that one’s homeland is not valued or respected by the interlocutor on the other side of the table, then diplomacy is unlikely to succeed. American culture, when shared, provides an understanding of why the United States may behave the way it does, why it holds certain interests, and how it pursues those interests. An understanding of elements of American culture can help those abroad contextualize the United States and how it envisions its role in the world. While the deliberate sharing of U.S. culture may “procure them its praise,” as Jefferson hoped, it is not necessary that it be seen positively. Cultural diplomacy is about using shared understanding to advance U.S. interests, not the distribution of propaganda to generate approval among foreign audiences.

It is likewise important to note that cultural diplomacy is not synonymous with public diplomacy, though the former is a component of the latter. As the 2005 Report of the Advisory Committee on Cultural Diplomacy begins, “Cultural diplomacy is the linchpin of public diplomacy; for it is in cultural activities that a nation’s idea of itself is best represented.”⁴ Historian Jessica Gienow-Hecht draws the distinction between the two, writing that “Cultural diplomacy entails the management of cultural relations as well as the effort to influence the international environment by exporting and exchanging cultural resources, artifacts, and achievements. Public diplomacy, in turn, delineates governmental efforts to directly address people in other countries (rather than merely their governments) by way of media such as radio broadcasting, print publications, and the internet.”⁵ While U.S. public diplomacy focuses on communicating with foreign

audiences and messaging U.S. policies, cultural diplomacy tells the story of Americans and the country to build understanding and ties.

The United States has engaged in cultural diplomacy since early in its existence, but it has never fully embraced it as a formal practice. Instances of cultural diplomacy in the 18th and 19th century were often amateurish and had little to no support from the government.⁶ Even when the importance of formal cultural diplomacy came to be recognized by U.S. policymakers in the Cold War era, the practice still never found a clear home in the government. Krenn writes that even at the time where there was the greatest focus and investment in spreading American culture in the Cold War, the practice remained “the redheaded stepchild of U.S. diplomacy.”⁷ Extensive cultural programming has been facilitated by the U.S. government, but a strategy for leveraging U.S. culture for diplomatic gains has been, as one report from the Americans for the Arts put it, “less than optimally deployed.”⁸

Part of the challenge of incorporating cultural activities into diplomatic strategy is the issue of measurement and evaluation of impact. In order to fund cultural activities for diplomatic ends, policymakers desire evidence that investing in such programming yields positive results. While survey data and anecdotes show significant influence of cultural programming, drawing any causal link between such programming and diplomatic outcomes is infeasible. Much of the current measurement focuses on attitude surveys, evaluating policy outcomes, stakeholder interviews, media analysis, and network mapping.⁹ This report does not focus on the evaluation of cultural diplomatic initiatives; its intent is to provide an overview of past activities and provide ideas for future programming. But investment in measurement, and a focus on using that measurement to convey lessons to policymakers, is a worthwhile area of further study.

An additional challenge particular to formal U.S. cultural diplomacy comes from the country’s proud tradition of freedom of expression. While governments in other countries have mandated the type of art that receives financial support and that may be used for diplomatic ends, such government interference in artistic expression has historically been viewed as antithetical to American values. Krenn wrote of the efforts of Theodore Roosevelt, Woodrow Wilson, and Franklin Delano Roosevelt (FDR) to formalize cultural diplomacy during their presidencies and the paradox they faced: “Each of the men understood the power of culture, but they also clearly perceived that utilizing culture as a means of diplomacy risked accusations of government interference in cultural matters in which it had no business or, even worse, of charges that the United States was engaging in the insidious act of propaganda — something associated with...Nazi Germany and the communist Soviet Union, not democratic America.”¹⁰ Though this feature of U.S. society is a constraint, it does have distinct value, as is discussed in following sections. Nevertheless, the understandable hesitancy to develop a robust national cultural diplomatic strategy has led to a halting approach to the practice by the United States.

And yet, despite the lack of an overarching strategy for using U.S. cultural power for diplomatic ends, there have been dozens of U.S. government programs aimed at spreading U.S. culture with the intention of benefiting the country’s standing. This report focuses on programming implemented by the U.S. Department of State (herein “State Department”). The State Department, particularly its Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs (ECA), has been the primary organ of the U.S. government tasked with carrying out these activities.

Survey of U.S. Cultural Diplomacy Programs

Because of the amorphous nature of culture, deciding which categories of programming to include is inherently arbitrary. The categories utilized in the paper were derived from researching the breadth of activities related to U.S. cultural diplomacy and grouping them accordingly. Notably, this does not include education as a category. Many cultural initiatives use education as a tool, but this report treats educational initiatives as distinct from cultural programming. There are other government supported programs that target issue areas tangential to U.S. culture that are excluded from this survey, such as judicial initiatives or military training. While programs intended to spread U.S. views of justice or military norms are rooted in U.S. culture and have diplomatic implications, they are not primarily focused on cultural exports and exchange for diplomatic ends.

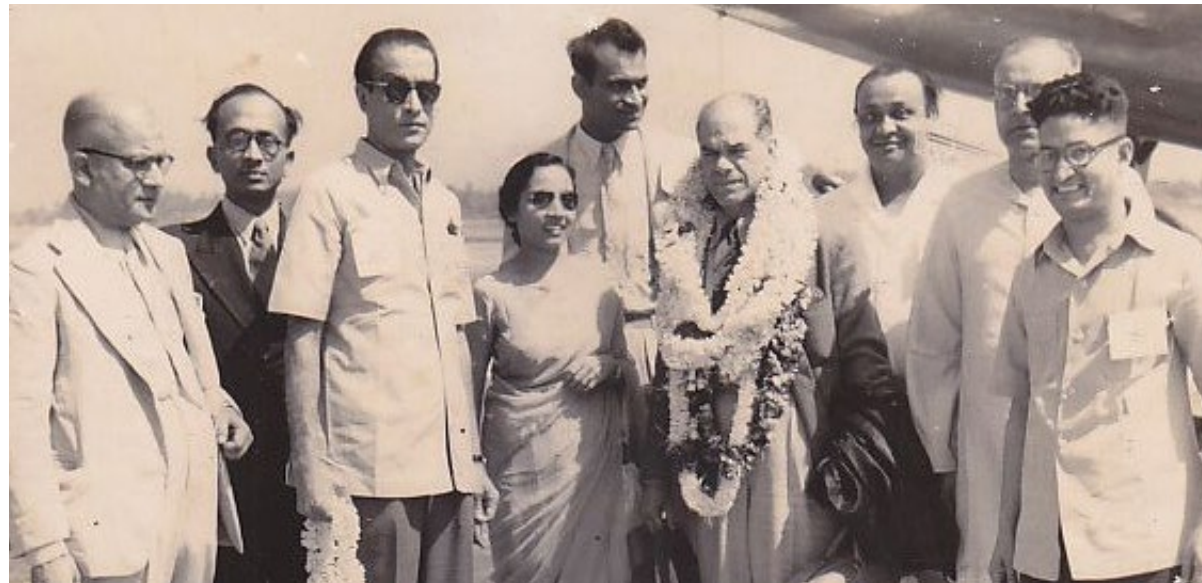
The following categories of U.S. cultural diplomatic programming are presented in alphabetical order and are not a reflection of their relative importance.

Cinema

The United States retains its role as a superpower of cinema.¹¹ The major film production centers around the world like Nigeria and India are referred to as Nollywood and Bollywood for a reason. Movies, and to a lesser extent television, have been a hugely successful medium for telling stories of the United States. The wide reach of American cinema provides a great foundation for diplomacy. As the public diplomacy scholar Nicholas Cull wrote, “because motion pictures command a large audience and have a role in forming that audience’s perceptions of the wider world, they should be of concern to diplomats.”¹²

Film festivals, somewhat like fashion shows, offer a useful platform for U.S. diplomacy. They have the ability to convey themes and purposefully elevate the voices of those invited to participate. They also create a sense of community around cinematic work. During the Cold War, the State Department sent representatives of Hollywood to film festivals in countries of geopolitical importance. In 1952, for example, Chester Bowles, the U.S. ambassador to India and Nepal, arranged to have the director Frank Capra attend the International Film Festival of India (IFFI). Capra’s attendance at IFFI, which was also attended by Indian prime minister Jawaharlal Nehru, was, as the scholar Nitin Goval put it, “one of many coordinated displays of geopolitical friendship between the United States and India.”¹³ The decision to participate alone can have geopolitical significance. Early in the Kennedy administration, the United States decided to officially participate in the Moscow and Karlovy Vary film festivals. The U.S. entries were decided on by

a mix of Hollywood advisors and State Department/U.S. Information Agency personnel — a remarkable occurrence given the Red Scare that had upended the industry the decade prior. Hollywood executives were glad to have the opportunity to expand their market, while the US government entities involved saw it as important for the United States to be represented, like with the Olympics, as well as an arena of ideological competition that should not be ceded to adversaries.¹⁴



Frank Capra's reception for IFFI 1952. Scanned from Family Album; appeared in media, Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons.

The State Department still supports film festivals abroad and at home, but they are lower profile than the convenings of the Cold War era. The primary mode for this outreach is the American Film Showcase, which facilitates film screenings and other activities related to film in 40 countries, coordinated by ECA and embassies, and administered by the University of Southern California's School of Cinematic Arts.¹⁵ The presentations of films abroad allow for interactions and gatherings that are predicated on works of art that provide a range of views of American society and culture. Through the showcase, the State Department also supports screenings of international films in the United States. In 2024, the Department partnered with the Middleburg Film Festival to screen nominees for the Oscar's Best International Feature Film category.¹⁶ This type of programming does the important work of developing international connections at home, giving American audiences greater understanding of other cultures. In the long term, this type of programming facilitates connections that allow for cultural exchange that can act as the foundation for U.S. diplomacy.

Cuisine

As a 2015 National Geographic feature put it, “[The] United States’ most successful export is culture, and our most quickly developing cultural space is the culinary arts.”¹⁷ The “melting pot” nature of the United States has given it a tremendous advantage in the emerging fields of gastrodiploamcy and culinary diplomacy. While the two terms are often conflated, the scholar Johanna Mendelson Forman delineates

between the two, explaining that gastrodiploamcy entails “using food as a means of persuading audiences about the power of cuisine to promote specific foreign policy goals,” while culinary diplomacy involves the use of food among elites for diplomatic ends, such as state dinners.¹⁸

The most high-profile attempt to capitalize on the United States’ culinary prowess came through a partnership between the James Beard Foundation and the State Department, which sought to employ chefs as culinary ambassadors. The Art Envoy Program’s Diplomatic Culinary Partnership, along with the James Beard Foundation, enabled 83 American chefs to represent the United States and share its history through cuisine at events with foreign dignitaries.¹⁹ Chefs also took on public-facing roles as part of the program, with one American chef traveling to Pakistan to partner with a local chef and discuss the two countries’ culinary traditions on a Pakistani television show.²⁰ This example of U.S. culinary diplomacy was put on hold by the Trump administration but shows promise as a replicable model for using chefs with substantial cultural cachet as envoys who can demonstrate the unique melding of cultures that features in American cuisine.²¹

Cuisine can be a country’s resource for boosting tourism and economic prospects.²² The most cited example of this phenomenon is Thailand’s gastrodiploamcy, which the Thai government credits for significantly boosting tourism over the past 20 years. In addition, the program has helped change perceptions about Thailand and spread awareness of the country’s history.²³ Likewise, South Korea has benefited from promoting its cuisine abroad, helping generate economic opportunities for the Korean diaspora while increasing tourism.



New members of the American Culinary Corps pose for a photo during a launch event for the Diplomatic Culinary Partnership at the U.S. Department of State.

The United States has immense informal gastrodiploamacy, with U.S. companies around the world like McDonalds, Starbucks, and KFC shaping how foreign publics view the United States. But the U.S. government has not been active in formal gastrodiploamacy in the same way as Thailand and South Korea, instead focusing programming on trying to shape export markets for U.S. goods. This has primarily been done through trade delegations intended to secure market access, rather than diplomatic programming meant to shift public perceptions about American cuisine and its culture. The United States did attempt to shift perceptions and market behavior through a 2019 gastrodiploamacy program in Morocco, where it undertook cooking expositions centered around American beef. Alex Flack, who helped administer the program, wrote that “U.S. diplomats developed a week of events strategically geared toward the Moroccan meat processing, packaging, and selling industry; the Moroccan culinary sector; and the everyday ordinary Moroccan citizen.”²⁴ The goal was to instill belief in Moroccans that the United States could be trusted to produce halal beef, and in doing so, open a new market. Where a trade delegation could make the economic case for the competitiveness of U.S. beef, gastrodiploamacy was the most useful tool available for changing foreign perceptions about U.S. food and food production in general.

Fashion

Fashion can convey individuality alongside tradition, making it a particularly useful medium for cultural diplomacy. Much of the attention provided to fashion’s role in diplomacy has centered on what diplomats choose to wear. Secretary of State Madaleine Albright was known for making statements through the brooches she wore and authored a book on that method of signaling entitled “Read My Pins.”²⁵ Secretary Albright said that jewelry was part of her “personal diplomatic arsenal” and told colleagues and reporters to look at her pins for messages.²⁶ As first lady, Jackie Kennedy was known for wearing dresses that incorporated design elements from the countries she visited, paying homage and demonstrating an interest in the cultures she was interacting with.²⁷



Madeleine Albright Collection of jewelry, described by Albright as “Pins of the People,” which she used to signal policy messages. LBJ Library from Austin, Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons.

While the use of fashion for diplomatic signaling has a long tradition, the United States has only recently attempted to create diplomatic programming centered around fashion. Since at least the early 2000s, embassies in Washington have hosted occasional fashion and jewelry shows that featured designers from their countries. Recognizing this growing tradition, the State Department’s Protocol Office partnered with Elle Magazine in 2016 to host an event on the use of fashion in diplomacy, which featured remarks from Secretary of State John Kerry and secured the participation of more than 80 countries.²⁸ Three years later, the State Department hosted a fashion show that featured ambassadors and their spouses wearing clothing from around the world alongside runway models, representing designers from five continents.²⁹ The State Department’s hosting of the event gave the opportunity to cultivate useful diplomatic relationships through cultural exchange. As will be discussed in the final section of this paper, this area of formal cultural diplomacy remains nascent in the United States and has the potential for greater use.

Fine Arts

The fine arts have been the most consistently utilized medium for formal U.S. cultural diplomacy. In the 1930s, as Nazi Germany was rising and attempting to build stronger ties with Latin America, U.S. policymakers responded by turning to culture to thwart such efforts. In 1938, the State Department established the Division of Cultural Relations, which worked with the Office of the Coordinator of Inter-American Affairs to facilitate cultural exchange as well as undertake propagandizing efforts.³⁰ In his executive order creating the office, FDR outlined the function as being to, “Formulate and execute programs... by effective use of governmental and private facilities in such fields as the arts and sciences, education and travel, the radio, the press, and the cinema, [to] further the national defense and strengthen the bonds between the Nations of the Western Hemisphere.”³¹ Nelson Rockefeller led the effort and, according to the historian Milton C. Cummings, successfully managed to develop “a comprehensive program to promote closer cultural relations with Latin America, especially Brazil, Argentina, and Mexico.”³² Rockefeller’s programming facilitated displays of art from Latin America at the Museum of Modern Art (MOMA) in New York, which became the origin of the longest ongoing example of State’s arts programming, Art in Embassies.³³ The program officially began in 1963, but its roots stretch back a decade earlier when MOMA began loaning out art pieces to be displayed in embassies.³⁴ This model was notable for bringing together both privately funded endeavors and government-supported activities, trying to maximize the connections and capital in the private world with the strategic aims of the U.S. government.³⁵ The program grew to be its own dedicated office within ECA and now oversees more than 100 permanent exhibitions and upwards of 60 rotating exhibitions per year.³⁶ The office of Art in Embassies brings the work of American artists to the world, and often highlights art that has ties to the country it is displayed in. The program features a wide variety of pieces that are meant to display the rich history of the United States and its values, promoting more than just the artists themselves.

However, one attempt by the State Department to conduct art diplomacy demonstrates the tension that often exists when using culture for diplomatic ends. In 1946, the State Department launched the Advancing American Art program, which purchased paintings from American artists including Adolph Gottlieb, William Gropper, Marsden Hartley, Yasuo Kuniyoshi, John Mann, Georgia O’Keeffe, and Ben Shahn.³⁷ The program aimed to exhibit the art around the world, focusing on regions of geopolitical importance in

the emerging Cold War including Latin America and Eastern Europe. The exhibition was popular. When the show came to Czechoslovakia, the country's president, Edvard Beneš, attended and spent more than an hour engaging with the art.³⁸ However, accusations from Congress that the artists and their artwork promoted left wing ideology were significant enough to lead to the program's abrupt cancellation; the artwork was auctioned off.³⁹ Even President Harry Truman weighed in, questioning whether a painting by Yasuo Kuniyoshi could even be called art.⁴⁰ Though the exhibition was intended to promote the value of freedom of expression, it ironically may have undermined that message. Culture is a battleground of ideas and shifting norms, and cultural diplomacy initiatives can be caught up in the crossfire.

The relationship with the United States as a sponsor of art can also pose tension for artists. Jeffery Gibson, a Choctaw and Cherokee artist who had an exhibit sponsored by ECA at the 2024 Venice Biennale, stated plainly to *The New York Times*, "I have a complicated relationship with the United States."⁴¹ The works on display, representing both queer and native identities, explore in part the promises and failures of the United States. That complex interplay is complicated even further by the United States formally sponsoring the exhibition, leading critics to question whether the work is being appropriated to shield the United States from criticism over its foreign policy. As Aaron Katzeman wrote, "If Gibson's presence rendered the U.S.'s participation at the Biennale less applicable to direct boycott, then the pavilion functioned precisely as desired by the State Department: strategic cultural diplomacy as a form of counterinsurgency."⁴² The decision by artists to partner with the United States government can prove controversial for both sides of the relationship, but honest reckoning with the legacies of the U.S. government by the artists can lend greater power to their works as free expression and a representation of American values.

The cultural importance of art and artifacts can offer unique opportunities for diplomacy. For example, the United States has a reputation for repatriating stolen art, bridging the capabilities of law enforcement with diplomacy. Ardelia Hall, who worked at the State Department as the fine arts and monuments advisor from 1946 to 1962, led an effort to return art that had been looted by Nazis.⁴³ Over the course of her career, Hall and the State Department managed to return more than 4,000 pieces of art to the 14 countries of origin.⁴⁴ Repatriating art offers a useful tool for diplomats, as it demonstrates a care for other cultures and a willingness to use U.S. law enforcement in support of their interests. In 2013, the United States returned a 2,700-year-old silver griffin to Iran during a major trip to the United States by Iran's then-President, Hassan Rouhani.⁴⁵ The artifact had been seized by U.S. law enforcement from an art dealer who had brought it into the United States illegally, and it was decided by the State Department to return it as a sign of goodwill amidst a push for the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA, also known as the Iran nuclear deal). The JCPOA was an immensely complicated piece of diplomacy that first required an easing of tensions between two countries that have not had formal diplomatic relations since 1979. The repatriation of the silver griffin was a useful tool to improve relations. The State Department issued a statement on the operation that said, in part, "The return of the artifact reflects the strong respect the United States has for cultural heritage property — in this case, cultural heritage property that was likely looted from Iran and is important to the patrimony of the Iranian people...It also reflects the strong respect the United States has for the Iranian people."⁴⁶ Demonstrating this type of respect for another culture can open diplomatic avenues that might otherwise be closed off.



Bertrand Russell at a public tribute celebrating his role in reducing tensions during the Cuban Missile Crisis. Geoff Charles, CC BY-SA 4.0 <<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/>>, via Wikimedia Commons.



A brooch at the Smithsonian American Art museum, transferred from the State Department by cultural affairs officer Ardelia Hall. Smithsonian American Art Museum, CC0, via Wikimedia Commons.

Literature

Throughout the Cold War, the United States invested heavily in literature to spread American ideas and values. Some of these activities would be better described as public diplomacy rather than cultural diplomacy, as they focused on the dissemination of literature created by the U.S. government for the purposes of shaping the information environment. But there were significant cultural diplomacy efforts as well, which focused on facilitating American literature being read around the world and providing access to foreign texts for American audiences. Since the Cold War, this programming has declined, with only a few remnants in the State Department today.

While many may think of the Cold War as defined by hostility between the United States and the Soviet Union, both countries made an effort to engage in cultural diplomacy to nurture sympathetic foreign audiences and help ease tensions. A particularly effective State Department-facilitated program was a writer exchange that brought together top writers from both countries. As Cynthia Snyder writes, these programs were carefully targeted to specific, diplomatically useful audiences and built lasting understanding and appreciation between Americans and Soviets. “[T]he exchanges of both people and works between American and Russian writers, artists, and scholars which began shortly after Stalin’s death in 1953 appealed to the inherent Russian respect for the intelligentsia and for cultural expression, while challenging some basic beliefs about their own society and ours.”⁴⁷ American writers demonstrated their freedom of expression in ways that were impressive to their Russian counterparts.⁴⁸ This type of elite exchange is particularly useful in cultural diplomacy as such figures often hold significant cachet in political circles and for the broader public. Changing elite views of the United States can thus produce a wider effect.

U.S. literature programs during the Cold War provide another important lesson for cultural diplomacy — the danger of allowing intelligence agencies to co-opt cultural initiatives. In 1967, it was revealed that the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) had been funding and helping disseminate American literature, as well as fine art and music behind the Iron Curtain.⁴⁹ The agency was directing funding to groups in both the

United States and Europe that produced important widely read and culturally important literature in the 1950s and 60s, most notably through the Congress for Cultural Freedom (CCF). CCF published a number of journals that featured writing by the likes of W.H. Auden, Isaiah Berlin, T.S. Eliot, Joyce Carol Oates, Flannery O’Connor, Bertrand Russell, and many others.⁵⁰ The journals were meant to, and were successful at, shaping anti-communist thought. But when it was revealed that CIA funding was behind these valued literary works, the publications were abruptly shut down; the backlash created skepticism towards all types of U.S. cultural programming, which persists to this day.⁵¹ Surreptitious attempts to shape culture may have short-term benefits, but they can come at the expense of longer-term ties and opportunities for cultural diplomacy if found to be for ulterior purposes.

More recent cultural diplomacy programming has utilized literature as a medium for exploring cross-cultural ties and transnational issues. The State Department has undertaken more targeted literature initiatives, such as one effort in Uzbekistan to publish a graphic novel that was authored by a Foreign Service Officer, Paul Benjamin.⁵² The book elevates a proto-feminist tale from Uzbek lore, merging it with Western comic style. The graphic novel was illustrated by Uzbek artists with a retro-Soviet look that is familiar in Uzbekistan. These types of joint projects between American creators and locals can help spread the type of messages that the United States wants to promote while ensuring the medium has resonance. Another notable cross-cultural program was run by the Office of Global Women’s Issues, which convened writers from four countries and the United States to explore solutions to climate change through creative writing.⁵³ These initiatives bring together figures who understand their local contexts to improve the chances of connecting with foreign audiences.

State Department programming has also sought to reach foreign audiences through making U.S. literature accessible, which was a proven method during the Cold War. Motivated by the Global War on Terror, the State Department began translating 20 books a year into Arabic. This was a larger cultural diplomacy program by the standards of the early 2000s yet only cost about \$5,000 per translation, paling in comparison to the spending on similar literary initiatives during the Cold War.⁵⁴ There have been efforts to expand translation services by members of Congress, including by translating foreign texts to make them more easily accessible for U.S. audiences and provide for greater shared understanding.

Music

One of the most oft-cited examples of successful U.S. cultural diplomacy was the Jazz Ambassadors program in the early Cold War era.⁵⁵ Starting in 1956, the State Department, in collaboration with the American National Theatre and Academy and Voice of America, facilitated tours of popular American jazz musicians around the world. This program was formally established through the International Cultural Exchange and Trade Fair Participation Act of 1956, which provided funds to send musicians, artists, and athletes abroad.⁵⁶ The jazz musicians were sent to geopolitical hotspots with the hope of improving sentiments towards the United States and drawing countries into its orbit. The program was considered largely successful in that mission. Quincy Jones, who was travelling as part of Dizzy Gillespie’s band on a State Department tour, told of being sent to Greece and playing a show that helped calm student protests against the United States.⁵⁷ The program was successful, at least in part, because it demonstrated freedom

of expression valued by cultural giants. Gillespie toured around the world as a cultural ambassador of the United States, while at the same time being able to critique the land of his birth. “I sort’ve liked the idea of representing America, but I wasn’t going over to apologize for the racist policies of America,” Gillespie wrote.⁵⁸

There has not yet been a State Department-sponsored program on par with the Jazz Ambassadors. In 2023, however, Secretary of State Antony Blinken launched the Global Music Diplomacy Initiative (GMDI), which sent American musicians abroad to conduct educational outreach and support international exchanges to build ties.⁵⁹ One of the approaches borrowed by GMDI from the Jazz Ambassadors program was partnering with private companies to help sponsor the outreach. Louis Armstrong’s 1960-61 Africa tour was paid for in part by Pepsi, which was trying to expand its market on the continent and compete with Coca-Cola.⁶⁰ GMDI has contracted with smaller artists, and the private partnerships have likewise been far less ambitious in nature.

The United States is home to many globally popular genres of music, each of which have ties to musical traditions abroad. Jazz, gospel, and hip hop are all American music traditions that have foundations in music from the African continent. These genres provide the United States with an opportunity to improve understanding of the country’s unique mix of cultures and develop fans abroad who will hold a lasting connection to the country. ECA has overseen the Next Level program, in partnership with the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill, which sends hip hop artists abroad on four-to-six-week tours where they conduct workshops, community performances, and outreach activities.⁶¹ Importantly, the Next Level program facilitates the blending of local musical traditions with hip hop, demonstrating the “melting pot” phenomenon of U.S. music.⁶²



The US Embassy in Botswana hosts a Fourth of July musical celebration. Department of State, Public Domain, via Wikipedia Commons.

American music’s global popularity offers a tremendous opportunity for cultural diplomacy and has a proven track record. But the challenge of managing big stars, who have the potential to critique the United States and offer views that conflict with the government, has proven an impediment to recapturing the success of the Jazz Ambassadors program. Risk aversion among U.S. diplomats, along with increased rejection of diversity as a source of strength for the United States, hinders the successful employment of music for diplomatic ends.

Theater and Ballet

Theater and ballet hold important lessons for how culture can be used to engage with adversaries. The USSR first employed cultural diplomacy as a tool for managing relations with the United States. In 1955, the American musical “Porgy and Bess” was touring in Europe with State Department support and received an invitation to perform in Moscow and Leningrad. When the State Department initially denied this request, the Soviet Ministry of Culture stepped in to pay the costs of bringing the production to the USSR.⁶³ The play “was warmly received by the audience,” according to a review in *The Evening Leningrad*. One critic enthused “‘Porgy and Bess’ is a work stamped with brilliant talent and unusual mastery.”⁶⁴ The reviewer noted that the musical’s score was “intentionally suffused with Negro musical folklore,” highlighting this fundamentally American style of musical theater.⁶⁵ Though the production had been seemingly co-opted by the USSR, the American ambassador attended the premier and the Star Spangled Banner was played before it began, ultimately representing an important early instance of Cold War cultural diplomacy.⁶⁶

It would take until 1973 for the U.S. government to successfully sponsor theater in the USSR, due largely to hesitancy within the U.S. bureaucracy over what performances would be appropriate and what timing would be acceptable. The State Department worked with the Soviet’s Ministry of Culture to approve two plays for the trip, “Our Town” and “Inherit the Wind,” both of which were produced by the Arena Stage and gave Russian audiences insights into American history and society.⁶⁷ “Our Town” provided a look into small town America, while “Inherit the Wind,” which fictionalizes the Scopes Monkey Trial, demonstrated the value of intellectual freedom, as well as advancing a critique of McCarthyism. Tickets were highly sought after and *The New York Times* reported at the time that the crowds were “surprisingly full of young people.”⁶⁸ The challenge of bringing the productions to the USSR paid off because of the popular success, the shaping of perceptions of the United States, and the facilitation of increased cultural exchange as détente deepened.⁶⁹

The Soviets’ use of their rich artistic culture by sending dance troupes to uncommitted nations sparked the rapid development of formal U.S. cultural diplomacy.⁷⁰ Recognition of the Soviet strategy led the Eisenhower administration to provide funding for similar U.S. programs. The administration instructed the American National Theatre and Academy (ANTA), which had been established by Congress in 1935 to promote the arts domestically, to develop programming aimed at the rest of the world. ANTA, comprised of leading figures in American dance, music, and theater, helped develop the programming.⁷¹ Bringing top experts into what was a public-private partnership ensured that there was both the insight and buy-in necessary to ensure high-level American performers would engage in these trips. Representing the United

States in a formal and highly public role gave those who participated a sense of prestige, helping their own careers and their country.

While ANTA's tours were primarily focused on bringing neutral countries into the U.S.'s sphere, there was a desire for direct cultural exchange between the United States and the USSR. But suspicions in each country ran deep, and there were concerns that imbalanced cultural exchange could provide the adversary with an upper hand. The opportunity for direct exchange came on the back end of significant diplomatic groundwork and the signing in 1958 of the "Agreement Between the United States of America and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics on Exchanges in the Cultural, Technical and Educational Fields."⁷² This agreement allowed for the Moiseyev Dance Company to perform across the United States that same year, with great success, followed by a similarly successful tour by the Bolshoi Ballet the following year.⁷³ This motivated ANTA and the State Department to prioritize sending American dancers abroad, beginning with a tour by the American Ballet Theatre (ABT) in 1960. The ABT shows were well attended and were capped off with Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev making a surprise appearance at the final show in Moscow and inviting ABT to come back for another tour in the USSR.⁷⁴ The tours of Soviet and American troupes demonstrated the capability of culture to open new channels for diplomacy between bitter rivals.



Soviet cello player Mstislav Rostropovich, American choreographer George Balanchine, and Soviet choreographer Yuri Grigorovich at the reception for the New York City Ballet troupe tour in Moscow. RIA Novosti archive, image #32796 / Alexander Makarov / CC-BY-SA 3.0, CC BY-SA 3.0 <<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/>>, via Wikimedia Commons.

Given the decline of the cultural relevance of ballet and theater after the Cold War era, it is understandable that State Department programming in the space has likewise diminished. While there have been some opportunities for playwrights, actors, and dancers through ECA's Art Envoy program, there has not been adequate funding to enable entire productions to travel abroad.⁷⁵ As with music, the scale has diminished and focuses today on sponsoring programming of a given artist in a country for five days to six weeks. The artists conduct workshops, provide mentorship, and give performances, but the reach of this programming tends to be local.⁷⁶

Sports

The United States has long recognized the diplomatic importance of sports, going back to the late 19th century. In a notable case of public-private cultural diplomacy, the sports equipment magnate Albert Spalding took two baseball teams on a tour around the world starting in 1888. The trip was primarily intended to expand Spalding's business, but it was also endorsed by President Grover Cleveland as a way to spread America's pastime and represent the country on the world stage.⁷⁷ Spalding was willing to take short-term losses in the hope that the game spreading around the world would grow his market for baseball equipment. He spent lavishly on the tour, which featured support acts and some of the most famous baseball players of the day. The tour, however, exposed a challenge of using something seen as unique to the United States as its medium for cultural diplomacy; foreign audiences interacting with Spalding and other baseball tours found the Americans to have a missionary-like zeal. As Robert Elias wrote in his study of the role of baseball in U.S. foreign policy, the tours were "often described as 'invasions of foreign territory.'"⁷⁸

In the Cold War period, U.S. sports diplomacy was similar to the model established by Cleveland and Spalding, with American athletes going on tours and putting on exhibitions. The Harlem Globetrotters did tours of Europe each year from 1950 to 1962 (and also South America, Asia, and Australia during some years) that saw them adorned with their American flag uniforms.⁷⁹ While the tours were privately financed and primarily organized by the team's manager, Abe Saperstein, Secretary of State Dean Acheson instructed U.S. embassies to provide logistics and, at times, intervened even more strongly. In 1951, amidst a major communist youth festival in East Berlin, the State Department organized a Globetrotters exhibition in front of 75,000 people in West Berlin, which featured Jesse Owens arriving by helicopter into the stadium at halftime. The game was meant to demonstrate American athletic prowess and cultural might, in addition to counteracting Soviet critiques of American racism as part of what President Harry Truman had labeled "The Campaign of Truth."⁸⁰ All the Globetrotters were black at a time when professional basketball in the United States was just beginning to be integrated.⁸¹ As befits true cultural exchange, the tours gave the players a different perspective on racism as well. In an interview with David Zarum, Mannie Jackson, who played for the Globetrotters and purchased the team in 1992, said, "The contradiction [between] what the U.S. proposes to be, and what it actually was — that was true back in 1951 and is still true today. Early on, the young players who went out of the country were shocked by how relatively indifferent people outside the U.S. were to race. Everybody enjoyed travelling out of the country because of that relative freedom and access to things that they weren't allowed back at home."⁸²



Harlem Globetrotter Bull Bullard grabs the rim of the basketball hoop at the Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe (SHAPE) Sports and Fitness Center, Belgium, Nov. 19, 2019. Photo by Senior Airman Hannah Malone, Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons.

While sports were successfully employed as a diplomatic tool during the Cold War, State Department officials flagged some challenges. In 1952, coming off the success of the Globetrotters tour, Saperstein attempted to organize a baseball world tour featuring the Brooklyn Dodgers and Cleveland Indians. While there was support for the tour at the highest level of the U.S. government, State Department officials based in the prospective countries worried about low attendance and questioned whether ticket revenue would be sufficient to fund the tour.⁸³ Those who would show up were likely to be small numbers of curious locals rather than large crowds and dignitaries. There were also logistical challenges associated with trying to organize a world tour with star athletes and their families.⁸⁴ Still, baseball and basketball were successfully employed during the Cold War to provide foreign audiences a chance to view world-class athletes and interact with a cultural phenomenon rooted in the United States.

Unlike other elements of cultural diplomacy, sports have had a largely consistent role in the U.S. diplomatic toolkit. Part of this can be attributed to the Olympics, which serves as a regular reminder of the linkages between sports and diplomacy. The national garb worn by teams in the opening ceremony, the deep ties certain countries have to specific events, representation by diaspora of their familial home, the presence of politicians, and the political statements by athletes and countries on the global stage all make the Olympic Games a premier platform for cultural diplomacy. The 1938 Olympics provide an important lesson on the importance of proactive U.S. engagement in cultural diplomacy. Jesse Owens' triumph across multiple events was seen as significantly undermining Adolf Hitler's vision for the games, and Owens would go on to be a cultural ambassador for the United States throughout the Cold War. But FDR's refusal to acknowledge Owens' achievement marked a missed opportunity to improve the view of the United States globally and at home. Owens remarked, "Hitler didn't snub me — it was our president who snubbed me...The president didn't even send me a telegram."⁸⁵ Failure on the part of the State Department and U.S. leadership to diplomatically engage in high-level events can send its own message.

The post-Cold War era has seen consistent U.S. engagement in sports diplomacy. While the format has shifted away from sponsoring major tours by teams, the State Department continues to underwrite athlete travel, workshops, exhibitions, and tournaments. At the highest level of sports diplomacy, ECA has sponsored the Sports Envoy Program, which sends high-profile U.S. athletes around the world to engage foreign audiences. Past envoys have included the figure skater Michelle Kwan and baseball players Cal Ripken, Jr. and Ken Griffey, Jr.⁸⁶ The Sports Envoy program is useful for conducting outreach tied to specific events. In 2024, the program sent former players to Brazil on the week of the Super Bowl, using the publicity generated by the championship game to promote U.S. programming.⁸⁷ It also came on the back of the National Football League (NFL) earlier that season hosting the first ever NFL game played in Brazil, which had helped further cultivate an audience that State Department programming could take advantage of.⁸⁸

ECA's Sports Diplomacy division has also run the Global Sports Mentoring Program, a public-private partnership with ESPN that facilitates five-week-long mentorship programs between key figures in U.S. sports media and leaders in 97 countries.⁸⁹ This program is a notable model of developing high-level networks that build relationships between countries while expanding U.S. cultural reach. The International Sports Program Initiative and Sports Visitor Program operate at a more local level, facilitating exchanges that provide coaches and athletes with exposure to structured athletic education.⁹⁰ Combined, this programming represents a broad array of activities that develop networks and shared understanding. While it could be utilized further, with opportunities for additional public-private partnerships, the existing sports diplomacy work of the United States is impressive.



Sports Envoy Kate Markgraf running with a girls group during Soccer Clinic Program in Dire Dawa, Ethiopia from July 11-12, 2012. US Department of State, Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons.

Video Games

The newest realm of U.S. cultural diplomacy is video games. This field holds significant promise because of the widespread use of the medium and its relative lack of constraints in relation to storytelling and world-building. Games have a proven ability to bridge and transcend cultures.⁹¹ Because many players

of popular games regularly interact with others from around the world, there is an inherent informal cultural diplomatic element. The challenge for the United States in strategically leveraging video games for diplomatic ends is twofold: 1) The video game industry is geographically diffuse, which creates market challenges for US-made games, and 2) Freedom of expression for U.S. game makers puts the U.S. government at a disadvantage in placing its preferred messages and ideas into video games in the way that competitor countries are able to. State Department programming has considered both problems and pursued solutions, but the limits remain; the field is most suitable for informal cultural diplomacy.

State Department programming on video games has generally tried to support the development of games that incorporate themes and stories that are useful to U.S. foreign policy goals. In 2010, the Department supported the creation of the game *X Life*, which was targeted at Middle Eastern audiences and allowed them to play as American characters in an effort to foster understanding.⁹² In 2012, the Department released the game *Trace Effects*, which was designed to facilitate English-language learning, as well as to incorporate U.S. history, geography, and culture.⁹³ *Trace Effects* followed a long line of State Department programming designed to teach English while imparting lessons on U.S. history, a proven tool for generating goodwill. Video games can also be an effective medium for teaching skills. A notable recent success of U.S. cultural diplomacy using video games is *Farmcraft*, which is modeled off the globally successful *Minecraft* but oriented to teach users about effective agricultural practices. The game was created in 2021 as a collaboration between the North American Scholastic Esports Federation and the State Department's Office of Agricultural Policy and Office of American Spaces and is played in more than 50 countries.⁹⁴

Much of the State Department's recent video game programming has focused on game development. In 2022, the Department hosted the first Game Exchange program, which connected 450 students from the United States, Israel, the United Arab Emirates, and Bahrain to develop video games that incorporated elements of the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals.⁹⁵ This format facilitated connections between students in different countries, skill development with expert advice, and the promotion of concepts of shared value. Games for Change (G4C), which was founded in 2004 and facilitates the Game Exchange program, hosts an annual festival and works closely with embassies and the State Department to bring participants together with industry leaders to promote positive innovations in gaming.⁹⁶ This type of convening is ideal for cultural diplomacy, as it allows U.S. diplomats the opportunity to both influence outcomes and make connection with the field.

While the United States has invested in its video game diplomacy, it is in many ways behind competitors. Of the 10 highest grossing mobile video games, only one was made by an American-owned company, and three were produced by Tencent, China's gaming behemoth.⁹⁷ While games being produced by another country do not guarantee that they will derive cultural diplomatic advantages, Tencent has made a concerted effort to incorporate Chinese cultural elements into its games with noticeable effect.⁹⁸ As the scholar Shaoyu Yuan highlighted, "These inclusions don't just add novelty; they introduce global audiences to Chinese folklore and history in a way that feels natural and entertaining."⁹⁹ The closest comparison for the United States might be the *Grand Theft Auto* series, which is one of the highest grossing video games series in history and has players around the world. While *Grand Theft Auto* does feature American characters and terrain based on U.S. cities, the messages conveyed by the game about the United States are generally negative and may hurt perceptions of the United States globally. This is a challenge for U.S.

cultural diplomacy posed by having a society that is open to the world with creators that are not confined by the wants of their government.



An attendee of LVL EXPO 2025 in Las Vegas cosplays as Wukong, a Chinese mythological character that features as the protagonist in the popular 2020 video game *Black Myth: Wukong*. Tomás Del Coro, CC BY-SA 2.0 <<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/2.0/>>, via Wikimedia Commons.



NFL game in the Estadio Azteca, Mexico City, in 2017. Taken by Raul G. and provided under the Creative Commons 2.0 License.

The Future of U.S. Cultural Diplomacy

This section puts forward ideas for improving U.S. cultural diplomacy and capitalizing on U.S. cultural power. These proposals are by no means exhaustive and are meant to take ideas derived from the above survey of past practices to help conceptualize opportunities to employ cultural diplomacy more effectively. The significant potential is apparent — there is a genuine need for policymakers to engage American cultural leaders to support their work and further U.S. interests through their talents.

The survey of U.S. cultural diplomatic activities demonstrates some areas where relatively small investment has the potential to yield substantial benefit. Culinary diplomacy, fashion, and video games are all underutilized modalities of U.S. cultural diplomacy. While the Diplomatic Culinary Partnership was a well-considered and initially effective program, it did not get the sustained investment needed to imbue it with lasting prestige in the culinary arts and allow international relationships to form through its structure as intended. This is a consistent problem with much of the cultural diplomatic programming, which can rapidly lose funding due to changes in political priorities and the lack of a large domestic constituency that supports the activities. Future efforts might consider partnerships with large multinational restaurant groups based in the United States, which could provide the expertise of their chefs for exchanges while benefiting from opportunities to increase market access and burnish the companies' global reputations.

Fashion has been severely underutilized as a tool of cultural diplomacy, and there are numerous ways it could be tapped into. Fashion shows, as important cultural gatherings, provide a tremendous opportunity to have U.S. diplomats or cultural ambassadors interact with cultural luminaries of host countries. These are gatherings where proud traditions from various countries are on display, and are often attended by elites, making them ideal opportunities for diplomatic engagement. The fashion industry is also a famously globalized system, which provides the chance to use existing business ties to build understanding of countries' capabilities and interests and look for opportunities where they align with those of the United States. The State Department previously housed experts on the textile industry, who focused narrowly on the textile trade, but that division has since been moved under the U.S. Trade Representative.¹⁰⁰ There is an opportunity to go well beyond trade issues to encourage cultural exchange through fashion, hosting more events at embassies that feature local designers, administering designer exchanges, and facilitating partnerships between US-based designers and their international counterparts.

The video game industry poses both more challenges and more opportunity than other modes of cultural diplomacy. Producing games is expensive and time consuming, which may constrain the United States from supporting the production of games from start to finish. Policymakers may consider employing

incubator models that target individuals that have experience in the industry, rather than focusing so much on students. The State Department may also consider partnerships with large, established gaming companies and host international challenges that produce concepts and scripts for the companies. This could help naturally imbue games with messages about unique elements of different cultures and provide greater access for groups who may otherwise struggle to engage with the industry. For these groups, having their stories told through US-produced games could build lasting bridges. The Department should also consider the Jazz Ambassadors model for streamers and video game influencers, internationally recognized figures who capture audiences by playing games but who also engage in other elements of culture and politics.¹⁰¹

All the areas of culture highlighted in this report have room for growth. The primary message is that the scope and profile of U.S. cultural diplomatic programming should be increased. In addition to having smaller musical groups host workshops abroad, the State Department should facilitate a modern-day Jazz Ambassadors program that helps put on concerts with American musical superstars in places where they would otherwise be unlikely to perform.¹⁰² Likewise, there should be an effort to facilitate theater performances of major U.S. productions abroad. While the costs of these productions are in the millions of dollars, partnerships with established global brands, who will look upon these performances as marketing opportunities and a source of ticket revenue, can go a long way in reducing the cost to American taxpayers.

U.S. sports provide the clearest lesson of the potential cultural products have for reaching foreign audiences and enabling them to engage with Americans, learn about one another's histories, and share bonds that can provide future opportunities for the United States. The State Department has designed programming that pairs high-profile athletes and major competitions with audiences in important locales. It has utilized public-private partnerships that allow a wider reach at lower costs than solely ECA-conducted programming. As practitioners consider ways to improve U.S. cultural diplomacy, they should look closely at the successes of Sports Division programming.

There is immense latent potential for U.S. cultural diplomacy. While other elements of U.S. power have experienced relative decline, American culture remains a tremendous globe-spanning force. But there has been a lack of strategic employment of culture for diplomatic ends since the end of the Cold War and a failure to adapt to shifts in culture and methods of diplomacy.¹⁰³ Beyond government funding, there is a need for policymakers to understand the power of culture, have dialogues with cultural leaders, and support structures to meld their work with diplomatic strategies. Likewise, there is a need for U.S. diplomats to be willing to take risks and try new approaches to cultural diplomacy. As culture is ever shifting, so, too, is much diplomatic programming. Sometimes this may mean tweaking existing programming, but often it will entail finding altogether new ways to engage populations. It is a challenge to ensure cultural diplomacy programming is contemporary, but it is imperative to do so if such efforts are to succeed.

Simultaneously, policymakers need to understand the limits of cultural power. Cultural diplomacy cannot patch over negative views of the United States that stem from unpopular wars or actions seen as antagonizing — or, worse, doing actual harm to — foreign populations. While cultural diplomacy can open pathways to reduce tensions and form cooperative agreements, corrosive actions by the U.S. government can prevent diplomacy from taking place. As the political scientist Joseph Nye wrote, “When the United

States becomes so unpopular that being pro-American is a kiss of death in other countries' domestic politics, foreign political leaders are unlikely to make helpful concessions.”¹⁰⁴ Current U.S. policies threaten to blunt the country's cultural power in a lasting manner. The Trump administration's move to cancel the British musical duo Bob Vylan's visas to perform in the United States is the type of action that shuts down avenues for cultural exchange and makes artists less inclined to participate in formal U.S. cultural programming.¹⁰⁵ Already there have been signs of this effect, with artists cancelling planned performances at the Kennedy Center in response to Trump administration policies, with calls for more performers to follow suit.¹⁰⁶ The U.S. government treating American culture as superior to others, while forgoing international exchange and closing itself to foreign markets, will preclude successful cultural diplomacy.

Limits on U.S. cultural diplomacy also derive from the reliance on legacy institutions to identify and support projects and endeavors. The Kennedy Center has limits on the types of artists it can engage because of its institutional identity and the expectations of its board and audiences. Likewise, ECA is constrained by public perceptions and concerns of political backlash if funds are used for a project that is met with negative feedback. These institutional constraints prevent risk taking, reducing the chances of bolstering cultural works that are most likely to capture global attention and have the greatest impact. Private-public partnerships can help to create some distance that minimizes political blowback, but criticism of the Kennedy Center has demonstrated the limits of that approach. More work needs to be done to simultaneously promote risk-taking in legacy institutions like ECA while supporting the creation of informal cultural diplomacy institutions that can meaningfully support major international cultural initiatives.

It is also important to caution against the weaponization of U.S. culture in response to adversaries. As the U.S. rivalry with China has deepened, there have been proposals to engage in a culture war, surreptitiously using U.S. cultural products to try to foment skepticism among foreign publics about Chinese leadership.¹⁰⁷ There are two primary reasons to be wary about this type of U.S. action. Firstly, the U.S. faces an asymmetric disadvantage in engaging in a covert cultural war. As an open society, the United States is vulnerable to adversaries disseminating messaging within its borders. It was this phenomenon that led to fears among U.S. policymakers about the role TikTok was having in spreading ideas supported by the Chinese government.¹⁰⁸ Authoritarian governments have far greater control over the information environment in their countries and are thus able to limit the spread of cultural products. During the Cold War, the United States passed the Smith-Mundt Act in part to counteract the threat posed by the Soviet Union's anti-American messaging.¹⁰⁹ Smith-Mundt also limited public diplomacy targeted at U.S. audiences, with lasting consequences. The second issue is the problem of backlash. If covert cultural programming is discovered, it can lead to foreign audiences becoming skeptical of, or even hostile towards, all American cultural products. This can eliminate opportunities for cultural diplomacy and broader U.S. diplomatic efforts. Accordingly, U.S. government support for cultural exchange should be transparent and publicly acknowledged.

Cultural diplomacy is not a cure-all, nor is it a tool without risks and tradeoffs. But it is a way for the United States to build lasting and useful ties with foreign audiences that can help advance U.S. interests over the long run. While cultural diplomacy has never been fully formalized as a practice within the U.S.

government, it has shown promise in the past, particularly during the Cold War. Policymakers present and future would be well-served by thinking about how to further use this component of U.S. power, finding creative ways to engage the artistic world. The entire practice of cultural diplomacy, and public diplomacy more broadly, would benefit from engaging artists and cultural figures to learn about how they connect with foreign audiences, the places they draw inspiration from, and how they represent the United States on the world stage. This type of collaboration between the U.S. government and the world of culture cannot just happen organically — it requires strategic outreach and willful openness to potentially uncomfortable opinions from those outside of government. But if listened to and worked with, these figures can drastically expand U.S. diplomatic capacity and outcomes. The United States is recognized for its cultural ties that reach around the world. It should use those connections and its pool of talent to further its diplomatic standing.

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